

## **Lorraine Hansberry: A Writer in the Sun**

Maria Gao

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Rosemary Laughlin

Lorraine Hansberry used her play A Raisin in the Sun to tell people about her own life struggle with racism and female discrimination. Her play shows us her problems were handled with determination and a will to keep striving for her goal of becoming a writer.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was born the youngest of four children in 1930 in Chicago, Illinois, to Carl and Nannie Hansberry. Carl was a successful real estate agent, and Nannie was a college-educated daughter of a minister. Both parents were involved with ending discrimination; although their stature was high in the black community, they were still subject to racist comments and threats by racist mobs. When the family moved to an all-white neighborhood, they had to deal with the protest and anger of their neighbors. This experience left young Lorraine very affected by the injustice of it.

Hansberry first became interested in theater and writing when she was in high school. She retained that interest in college at the University of Wisconsin, reading playwrights like Sean O'Casey and August Strindberg. In 1930, she moved to New York to begin her writing career. She wrote for many publications, such as Paul Robeson's Freedom magazine. She wrote reviews about local theatre productions and about books on literature, art, and politics. Hansberry had already begun writing A Raisin in the Sun, and in 1957, guests at a party read a scene from the play. Their response was so positive she became motivated to finish the play.

A Raisin in the Sun debuted in New York in 1959, Hansberry being the first black woman to have work produced on Broadway. The play was about a poor black family's

struggle for escaping poverty. The dreams about freedom and having a better life were universal, making the play accessible to all audiences. It struck a chord in people as the real life of a black family, and soon it was one of the most popular plays.

The main conflicts in the play reflect the 1950s. Blacks and whites were still separated, and they usually had no contact with each other apart from work. Ruth Younger was a maid for a white lady, and Walter Younger was the chauffeur of a white man. Hansberry portrayed racism in her play by having the representative of the white neighborhood come to the Youngers' apartment to persuade them not to move in; he even bribes them.

The play also showed black people having dreams and working hard for them: Mama wants a better house, Walter plans to open up a liquor store to make more money, and Beneatha strives to become a doctor. In reality, many black people had given up on dreaming that they could have a better life, and the play illustrated the perseverance of working hard to get what one wants. A romantic conflict shows Beneatha dating two men, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai. After Beneatha tells George about her dreams of becoming a doctor, George laughs and scorns her since he thinks women are just made to do housework, while Joseph encourages her to get a medical degree and go to Africa with him.

These conflicts of the play showed a younger Lorraine Hansberry, who was trying to make her dreams come true while circumstances discouraged her. When Lorraine was just beginning to write, she was one of the first blacks to go to the University of Wisconsin, bringing stares and nasty comments. However, she kept her head up and worked hard to do whatever was necessary to become a successful writer. Her first

husband, Robert Nemiroff, was a big supporter and helped her to overcome obstacles, another of which was sexism. But Lorraine Hansberry talked about how she overcame discrimination against females, “A woman who is willing to be herself and pursue her own potential runs not so much the risk of loneliness as the challenge of exposure to more interesting men—and people in general.” Later she proudly said, “I was born black and female.” In A Raisin in the Sun, Beneatha does not go to medical school, but with the new hope for the Youngers and Walter’s admission that Beneatha should do whatever it takes to become a doctor, the play strongly suggests that Beneatha will become a doctor.

When A Raisin in the Sun became popular, it told everyone about black struggle and social rights. Eventually, as Hansberry talked more and more, A Raisin in the Sun became a crucial work for aspiring black artists. Her words inspired people to do the best that they could. They knew that they could also succeed.

Lorraine Hansberry believed that everyone, one way or another, could make a difference in the world. She did not let hardships overwhelm her. Even today, she has influenced many blacks around us to try their best and never give up. She is truly one of the best authors to come from Illinois. [From Black Arts Movement. “Lorraine Hansberry,” <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/people/lorraine.html> (Oct. 20, 2005); “Lorraine Hansberry.” North American Biographies, Vol. 10; Voices from the Gaps Women Artists and Writers of Color, “Lorraine Hansberry,” [http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/hansberry\\_lorraine.html](http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/hansberry_lorraine.html) (Oct. 20, 2005); and Margaret B. Wilkerson, “Lorraine Hansberry,” African American Writers.]